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ABSTRACT

The failure of today's newspapers to provide creative leadership in successfully integrating our cities is tragic. White racism has become a critical factor in the neglect of our cities, as has the reluctance of some newspeople to involve themselves more deeply in efforts to explain today's urban crisis. Much of the journalism profession's disappointing performance in urban affairs reporting can be blamed on journalism education's failure to provide the requisite expertise in urban affairs to aspiring journalists. During the past few years, most of the special programs in urban affairs that were created in the late 1960s and early 1970s in schools and departments of journalism around the country have been dismantled. Some examples of progress can be seen, however, as the subject of urban affairs creeps slowly back into the agenda of conventions and other meetings of journalistic organizations. The progress is, however, slow and slight. (AEA)

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Resolved:

THE PRESS IS FAILING THE CITIES

Presentation of affirmative side

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TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

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Considering today's "crisis" of the cities, I was reminded of the controversy a few years ago in which Coleman Young, the mayor of Detroit, criticized one of that city's newspapers for following a "philosophy of news" that he considered "destructive to the city."

Addressing a meeting of concerned leaders of his city, Young said that the news editor of the Detroit News had given its staff a memorandum stating that the newspaper was aiming its product "at the people who make more than $18,000 a year, and are in the 28-40 age group."

The news editor's memo made the following observation, Mayor Young said:

> Keep a lookout for, and then play well, stories the city desk develops and aims at this group. They should be obvious: they won t have a damn thing to do with Detroit and its internal problems.[1]

Mayor Young's reading of that memo, and subsequent interpretation of it, may have been an appropriate one and it may have not. The mayor's apparent feeling that the Detroit News had forsaken the central city and its problems for the more comfortable surroundings of suburban life are easy to appreciate, however.

Every year, it seems, we find it more difficult to understand what is happening in our cities. City after city walks the tightrope of financial disaster, in the pages of our press, without the reasons for its financial straits having been adequately explained--explored extensively, even--in preceding issues of our newspapers.

Subjected to such surprises daily, or so it seems at times, we're tempted to accept the proposition that the press is failing the cities.

There existed a time, only a few years ago, when the press was very much "into" our cities. Burning buildings and frenzied store-front looters are hard to overlook, obviously, and demand some explanation.

In response to the urban agony and disturbances of the late 1960s and early 70s, the news media attempted to provide more in-depth reporting.[2]

Workshops, conferences, seminars and other special activities were devised and conducted to help newspeople understand urban affairs--riots, mostly.[3]

Designed to breed experts in the interpretation of urban problems, special programs of mid-career education were funded by private foundations and government. (Included, for example, were Northwestern University's Urban Journalism Center and an urban affairs reporting institute at the University of Chicago).[4]

Professional schools of journalism, on the university level, instituted specialized courses in urban affairs reporting and related subject areas.[5]

In article after article, in the media of mass communication generally, the press was criticized--or berated itself--for not giving more attention to urban affairs, or not probing their critical factors in sufficient depth.[6]

Today, however, things are different.

Despite the deepening crisis in our cities, a recent examination of professional journals and trade press periodicals devoted to journalism failed to discover a single article, in current issues of those periodicals, concerning the press and the cities.

A check of previous years found no extensive critique of press performance in this important area--the Columbia Journalism took a passing note of a British author's book, however[7]--since a 1974 article in Mass Comm Review.[8]

In the Mass Comm Review article, David Sachsman made the following observation of special relevance to today's concern:

> Metropolitan and suburban media generally ignore housing problems. Metropolitan newspapers occasionally carry stories on the horrors of ghetto housing and the failure of the Model Cities program (a federal program to improve housing) but most local newspapers think of housing as a story for the real estate pages, one of the weakest sections of many American newspapers.

In a subsequent content analysis of newspaper performance in covering social issues, Michael Ryan and Dorothea Owen found that a sample of leading United States newspapers devoted less than 10 per cent of their news/editorial space to social issues.[9]

Of that less than 10 per cent, Ryan and Owen reported "relatively large percentages of space are devoted to crime-law, health and education news, but data indicate that a general disregard for six social issues: mass transportation, housing, racism-sexism, ecology, poverty-welfare, and drug abuse, most of which affect largely poor to lower middle class citizens.

"The fact that most of the crime-law news was event-oriented, Ryan and Owen pointed out, indicates the metropolitan press is more concerned about covering specific, isolated events than about covering crime-law in the broader terms which can help readers better understand the problem."

Although they have a high regard for journalists like Neal Peirce and some of the other specialists in urban affairs trained in the 1960s and 70s now working in New York, Washington and other centers of political power, experts at places like the Urban Institute[10] and the University of Pennsylvania's School of Public and Urban Policy[11] believe that news reporters generally are still concerned generally with immediate events.

The media of mass communication tend to reflect the trends in public interest, it appears to such experts, rather than setting the trends through positive leadership.

In addressing themselves to affluent readers of today's upper middle class, who have fled the predominately black areas of our central cities, the press has engaged in "white flight" itself.

That failure of today's newspapers--a failure to provide creative leadership in integrating our cities successfully, and in good time--is perhaps the most tragic failure of the press. The destructive results of that tragedy were described not long ago in the following comments published by an alternative newspaper:

> It is the city--like so many others--for which race remains a tragic, if unacknowledged, determinant of character.
>
> Racism is a suspect concept these days, chided for its divisiveness or written off as archane in the face of class or economic factors. But it takes only half-opened eyes and a nodding acquaintance with statistics to realize that banishing the term cannot banish the reality.
>
> It is only made all the more complicated by the fact that racism has eaten its way into the heart of our social and economic institutions--so that it has come to seem nearly a natural element. I sometimes think that this is the most disturbing aspect of racial politics today; not its blatant manifestations, but the way that racism's fruits--the inferior schools, the sprawling slums, and the rest--have come to be largely accepted facts of urban life.[12]

Turning to the need for more creative leadership, columnist Roberta Lynch pointed out that "There is an urgent need for urban alliances that have the boldness and the vision to pose alternative solutions to the problems of our cities in a way that redistributes power and resources to meet the needs of the majority, not the businesses of the elite."[13]

"Such alliances must also have the courage," Ms. Lynch explains, "to confront our racial dilemmas forthrightly. For the future of our cities depends on our ability consistently and consciously to overcome the bitter legacy of racial discrimination that continues to blight our social landscape."

Because the problems of our cities impact upon blacks most directly, and the evolution of today's urban "crisis" coincided with the beginning of

society's "black revolution," many newspeople have been conditioned to read the term "urban" as "black."

White racism, therefore, has become a critical factor in the neglect of our cities, and the reluctance of some newspeople to involve themselves more deeply in the efforts to explain today's urban crisis.

"Tuning out" the "urban turn-on" of the late 1960s and early 70s, today's trendy newstypes are frequently giving greater attention to restaurant reviews and other related aspects of "gentrification" than to community development efforts and related reform on the elemental level.

The press's flight from urban obligation that occurred during the past few years is reflected, naturally, in academe's Fourth Estate.

During the past few years, most of the special programs in urban affairs that were created in the late 1960s and early 70s have been dismantled. In his 1975-76 survey of news/editorial programs, in schools and departments of journalism around the country, Warren Agee found no courses in urban affairs reporting. He found no such courses planned. Not one. On the contrary, Agee's research disclosed that one former course in that area had been dropped since the previous survey, in 1972-73.[14]

In a more recent study, of specialization in journalism, Hugh Culbertson found special emphases on science, medicine and several other fields, but none in urban affairs.[15]

Much of our profession's disappointing performance in urban affairs reporting can be blamed, it appears, on journalism education's failure, in turn, to provide the requisite expertise in urban affairs.

In Temple University's journalism curriculum, for example, no urban studies of any kind are required for graduation. Temple is typical, it appears.

In an attempt to renovate the press a delapidated capabilities for the expert reporting of urban affairs and their perceptive interpretation, organizations like the Urban Institute have stepped up their efforts to communicate more effectively with newspeople.

Illustrating that approach, the University of Pennsylvania's School of Public and Urban Policy and Center for Philadelphia Studies conducted a "Regional Economic Development" colloqium for news media professionals last January.

Similar efforts are getting underway at other places--here, obviously, at this conference.

Some examples of progress can be seen. Several months ago, now, the Associated Press featured its series "City Faces"[16] and the subject of urban affairs is creeping, slowly, back into the agenda of conventions and other meetings of journalistic organizations.

We have a long distance to go, however, still.

Last November's issue of The Public Relations Journal included, for example, an explanation of an innovative program of the Conference Board designed to assist industrial firms identify developing issues and obtain insight into the challenges of the 1980s.

Seeking some precious perspective on urban affairs, one of the Board's members was surprised, the author of the article related, "to find the best article on the Carter administration's urban policy in the counter-culture weekly, Village Voice."[17]

Well...

The Village Voice is part of our society's press, we can say. Yes, of course.

But where, tell me, are the leaders of the press?

The nation's prestige press?

Failing our cities.

That's where.[18]

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NOTES

1. "Young raps the News for Page 1 'Horrors'," Detroit Free Press, June 23, 1976.

2. See, for example, "ABC Names Urban Affairs Correspondent," RTNDA Bulletin, May, 1968, p. 50.

3. One of the best such conferences was that resulting in The Media and the Cities, (Chicago: University of Chicago, Center for Policy Study, 1968)--a compilation, edited by Charles Daly, of position papers presented the conference.

4. For additional perspective on this movement, see John De Mott, "Proposal for Graduate Study:Interpretative Reporting of Urban Problems," Journalism Educator, Volume 28, Number 4 (January 1974), pp. 15-17, 77.

5. Maurice Funke, "Lovell tailors course for urban specialists," Editor & Publisher, May 3, 1969, p. 23.

6. For example, see Jack Deacy, "What the Big Dailies Don't Tell You About What's Going on in the City," New York Magazine, May 24, 1971, pp. 40-50.

7. James Boylan, "City Politics and the Press," Volume 13, Number 3 (September-October, 1974) p. 57.

8. "Mass Media and the Urban Environment," Vol. 1, No. 3 (July, 1974), pp. 3-11

9. "A Content Analysis of Metropolitan Newspaper Coverage of Social Issues," Journalism Quarterly, Vol. 53, No. 4 (Winter, 1976) pp. 634-40, 671.

10. Telephone conversation with Susan Tifft, Editor, Policy and Research Report, on April 9, 1980.

11. Telephone conversation with Nancy Moses, Associate Director of the university's center, April 3, 1980.

12. "Our Cities' Future Rests on Reallocating Power," In These Times, November 7-13, 1979, p. 13.

13. For another perspective on this problem, see Milton Viorst "In the Cities: Citizen Involvement Ought to Be Revived," Foundation News, July/August, 1976, pp. 35-39.

14. "Many Changes in Progress in News-Editorial Curricula," Journalism Educator, Vol. 32, No. 3 (October, 1977) pp. 17-20, 49.

15. "Specialized Journalism--a Structural View," Mass Comm Review, Vol. 5, No. 2 (Spring, 1978) pp. 2-5.

16 "'City Faces Takes Close Look at Urban Environment," AP Log, March 3, 1980, p. 2.

17. Robert H. Moore, "Planning for Emerging Issues: Research by Conference Board Sheds Light on Problems of Semantics, Issue Identification and Classification--and Some Likely Issues for the 80s," Vol. 35, No. 11, pp. 43-46.

18. For two interesting illustrations of "upbeat" approach to urban life by newspapers, see Jonathan Freedman's "Be It Known: Cities Are Not Harmful to Your Health," The New York Times, July 25, 1977, p. 21C, and "City Life is Good for You," Chicago Tribune, Nov. 26, 1974, p. 6.

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